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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [KWMN](#) [CB](#)
SUBJECT: CAMBODIA ELECTIONS: LEAD PARTIES GO HEAD-TO-HEAD
DURING SECOND FEMALE CANDIDATE DEBATE

REF: A. PHNOM PENH 554
[1](#)B. PHNOM PENH 522
[1](#)C. PHNOM PENH 403

[1](#)1. (SBU) Summary: A ruling Cambodian People's Party (CPP) candidate and lead opposition party Sam Rainsy Party (SRP) candidate faced off for the first time this pre-election season during a video-recorded political debate of female candidates on July 9. The debate was part of a 22-debate series in advance of the July 27 elections, and was the second of two female candidate debates (Ref A). Norodom Ranariddh Party (NRP) and League for Democracy Party (LDP) candidates also participated in the July 9 debate. As the moderator pointed out, the National Democratic Institute (NDI) used a debate format that could ensure a fair and impartial setting for dialogue. Listening to and watching the candidate dialogues, one might not have known that two of the relatively tame candidates belong to the two lead, rival parties in hotly contested Phnom Penh. The audience had segregated itself into CPP and SRP ballcap and t-shirt donning factions with NRP and LDP supporter pockets in corners of the room. However, the debate succeeded in providing a non-threatening, organized forum for the four candidates to provide information on their party's platforms and plans. The debate is scheduled to be televised on July 10 and July 11. End Summary.

CPP and SRP Candidates Face Off

[1](#)2. (SBU) Four female political party candidates from the CPP, SRP, NRP and LDP participated in a second debate on July [1](#)9. This was the first time during this pre-election season that candidates from the CPP and SRP have come to the same venue to discuss the issues. The Phnom Penh candidates were civil to one another, to the point that it was difficult to discern that two of the debaters are members of the leading rival parties in a hotly contested district, judging from their demeanor and their mostly tame statements during the debate. The CPP was represented by Krouch Soman, and the SRP by Lysrey Vina.

Debaters Stick To Party Platforms

[1](#)3. (SBU) There were few surprises in the debate content and debaters stuck mostly to their party platforms. For the CPP candidate, that meant a focus on the CPP's governing track record and achievements such as building roads, schools, and other infrastructure, and increasing economic development. The SRP candidate repeated the SRP platform to pass the anti-corruption law, and to tackle inflation, unemployment and poverty issues. The NRP candidate stated the party's commitment to the monarchy, and repeatedly pointed out the monarchy's role in bringing peace to Cambodia through the signing of the Paris peace agreement. The LDP candidate

focused on the party's proposal to give power to the Cambodian people, stressing that citizens should exercise their rights and freedoms to participate in government.

A Scant Few Nail-Biters

¶4. (SBU) A tense interaction arose during the portion of the debate when party members are allowed to ask a question of one other, pre-determined party candidate. The CPP debater was designated, by a lottery draw before the debate, to ask the SRP candidate one question, and asked: "The SRP held 24 seats in the National Assembly during this last mandate; what has the SRP done to help the Cambodian people besides inciting them to demonstrate?" Before the SRP candidate could reply, the moderator stopped the debate momentarily and requested that the candidates review the rules and guidelines, and stated that candidates are not to make statements that would directly criticize individuals or parties. However, upon review of the rules and guidelines for the debate, it was not apparent which rule was broken -- they generally restrict debaters from making personal insults or attacks towards other candidates or parties. The SRP member did not appear particularly phased, and responded that the SRP seeks to pass and then enforce an anti-corruption law; after passage, the SRP would use increased government revenues from tax collection to pay for civil servant salaries and building roads.

¶5. (SBU) Preah Vihear came up during the July 9 debate, as it had during the July 8 debate. This time, the SRP candidate lauded the inscription of Preah Vihear as a UNESCO

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World Heritage Site, but asked listeners "not to forget" that the land surrounding the temple was not designated as part of the site, and that the issue of the land surrounding the temple has not been solved. She stated that Cambodia might give up a little bit of its land one day, then a little bit more the next day. She also stated that land is lost through economic land concessions. There were guffaws from the audience at the comments.

Noisy Audience

¶6. (SBU) The moderator interrupted the debates a second time after the SRP debater pointed out that the audience was unruly during statements of the LDP candidate. The moderator asked that there be order among audience members. Emboff observed that the crowd was mostly quiet during the CPP candidate's statements, but that laughing and talking among some audience members during the statements of the other three candidates made it difficult to hear the debate at times. The noise seemed to be coming from the CPP-wear clad portion of the crowd.

Comment

¶7. (SBU) As we tick off debate number two of twenty-two, we can say that the debates are going as they were intended: in a fair, neutral fashion in a generally positive atmosphere. The noise level of the crowd during the second debate could have been controlled by the NDI-chosen moderator who mostly seemed unconcerned with the immature laughter and chatter, and was obviously not the fault of the debaters themselves. Emboff sat near two CPP supporters and overheard one ask the other whether he would be able to ask a question during the debate. The other CPP supporter told him no, that the questions had been decided in advance, and all that he had to do was cheer. While he may have been there just to cheer on his party candidate, the debate succeeded in giving him a chance to hear the platforms of a number of candidates to which he might not have been exposed before.

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